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SALON OF THE DILETTANTI—XI

Comstock's Fight for the Fig Leaf

REPORTED BY THE SALON'S SECRETARY

Anthony Comstock had stirred up a tempest in a teapot by his famous—or, as some chose to call it, infamous—raids on the Art Students' League, New York; and the unsavory brew had been simmering over



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the fires of indignation ever since. The Dilettanti thought the matter worth discussing.

Metaphorically speaking, Gutzon Borglum, one of the staunchest defenders of the League, had skimmed off the froth—distilled Comstock—and thrown it away, as an evidence of impure purism, about once a day on the average since the objectionable books were confiscated. Theodore Schroeder, attorney for the Free Speech League of New York, another champion of the art school, had challenged the doughty friend of the fig leaf to debate, and in his mind's eye—Comstock wasn't there—had quartered and drawn him. A host of editors the country over had taken sides and voiced the gospel of liberty, and had declared Comstock a public—to say nothing of an artistic—nuisance. The watch dog of purity had himself come out with a popular article on the crime of the nude. Artist and model had tried the case to their liking or

interest out of court; and the public had long been waiting expectantly to see where a jury of twelve in court would draw the line between prudery and pruriency.

In the meantime Anthony slept the sleep of the well-intentioned, and the brew simply simmered.

Most of the Dilettanti were non-committal. They frankly owned that they felt about like the old Saint Anthony—no relation of the New York namesake—in his historic stunt of trying to keep one eye on his prayer book and the other on his nude temptress. The Salon's Judge of Propriety, however, was more positive in his views. He felt that the League had courted rebuke, and that Anthony had simply made good.

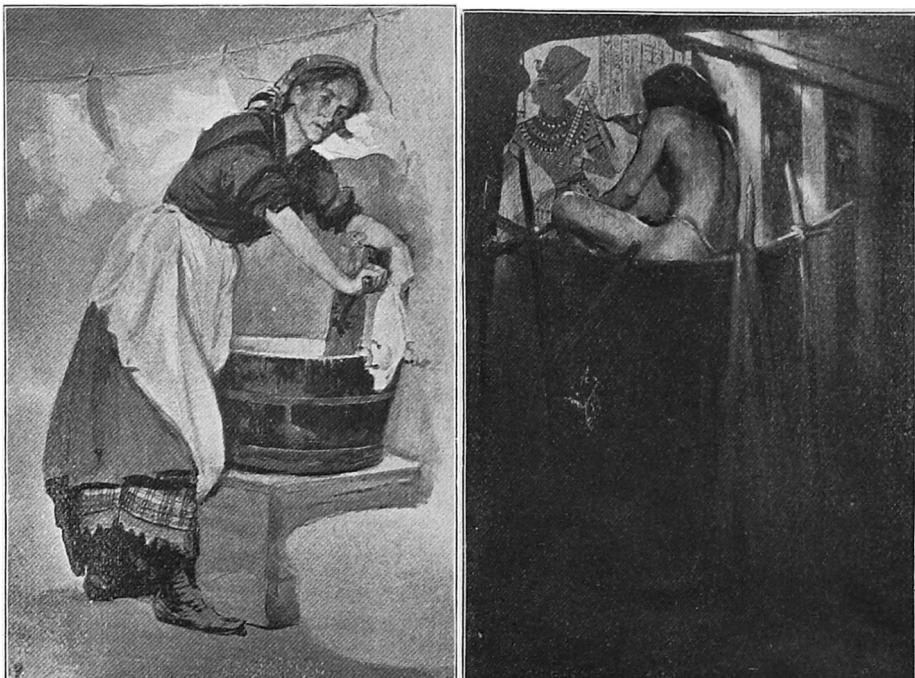
The fact of the matter was, he said, the question involved was not one of private right, but of public policy. There was no crime in the nude, it was what the nude did with itself. It was a question whether a male model had a right to take off shirt and trousers and put himself on exhibition on news-stands and book-store counters; canvass private homes, where he wasn't wanted; and invade business houses, where he wasn't welcome. It was a question whether a female model should be permitted, clad only in a smile and a hairpin, to visit club rooms and family circles, church parlors, and Y. M. C. A. reading rooms, public libraries and private boudoirs, wherever, in short, art students or teachers chose to send her, and flout her charms, or lack of charms, in puris naturalibus—commonly known in the parlance of the studio as "in the altogether"—before an admiring or a scandalized multitude.

It didn't matter much, the Judge insisted, whether the model brazenly went out as "he" or "she," in propria persona, or was smuggled out as "it," under screen of book covers, in half-tone reproductions of the crude drawings of students, with such accentuations or vagaries of anatomy as lack of skill or sheer deviltry might impose. It was an impudent offense, he thought, against the canons of propriety and decency adopted by and current in America.

Those canons of propriety and decency represented the consensus of opinion of church and postoffice department, of ethics and true aesthetics, of the fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters of gentle birth and good breeding throughout the country. And it wasn't for the directors of an art school, who wanted to show how nearly their students could get proportions or approximate the appearance of the real on paper, or for the apostles of license, whose names betrayed their extra-, if not their anti-American warp of mind, to run counter to a national sentiment and conviction. There was an old saying that the law was wiser than any one man—it represented the concentrated, crystallized wisdom of generations. And if the unwritten law of the United States said "screen your nakedness," it was the sound mandate of public policy and expediency, and not something for Tom, Dick and Harry to ignore for business purposes or from personal whim.

What was more, the Judge continued, that hackneyed old Biblical maxim, on which every offender against propriety and decency fell back

—because it was scriptural authority, and what was higher than Scripture?—"To the pure all things are pure," was the veriest cant of hypocrisy, as commonly used. Titus didn't know a thing about the bad drawings of the human form divine by art students, or of the machinations of schemers to make money out of muck, or he would have supplied a restraining footnote to his epistle. There wasn't a crime in the cata-



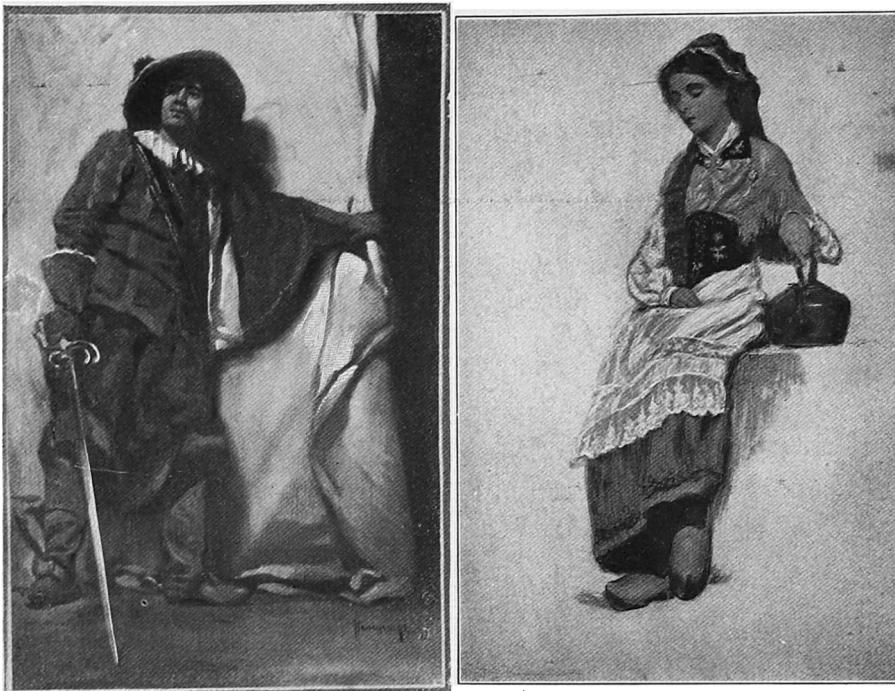
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logue that couldn't be justified or excused on Bible authority. Besides, theory was one thing and fact was another. The innate purity of body and soul of most people these days was quite an unknown quantity, a matter of assumption and it was a hazardous enterprise for priest or profligate to essay to determine who were the "pure" into whose hands the seemingly "impure" could safely be entrusted.

In the matter of doubtful cuisine it was always a safe policy to order something with its clothes on—eggs in the shell and potatoes in their jackets—and in the matter of artists' models it was well to sin on the right side and have them cover their nakedness before going out of the studio—be it on the street, or in the pages of a periodical. In point of fact and effect, the Judge continued, there was no difference whether the risque, the suggestive, or the "pure" naked emanated from the studio or the Bowery, it catered to prurient if it got into the wrong hands.

The law would quickly prohibit, had often prohibited the sale of questionable pictures issued for money-making purposes. Why should it, how could it draw the line on persons and positions?

Moreover, the much-talked-of diverse practice of nations was twaddle parading as argument. Because Germany permitted the unrestricted sale of photographs of nude models as artists' "studies" or for



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the pleasure of the prurient, as the case might be, was it any reason why America should throw down the bars?

The pure of mind? Couldn't, didn't moral obtuseness, blunted sensibilities, mere indifferences and callousness parade as purity of mind, just as stolidity masqueraded as dignity, and affectation posed as vivacity? Let the Old World, or the Orient, or any part of the globe keep its own customs or follow its own policy. If America chose to be puritanical and "tolerate a watch dog," as opponents of the watch chose to call it—it had a right to, and the national conscience wouldn't worry over the protests of a sporadic few.

And then, wasn't this stickling for personal liberty to do, or speak, or draw, or print as one pleased—better call it license and have done with it—a good deal of a sham, a lip profession—something to talk about? Gutzon Borglum, for instance, was the avowed enemy of Comstock in

the matter of the recent confiscation of the League's booklet. The Judge himself had lately dropped in at Borglum's studio when a young woman was posing "in the altogether" for an ideal creation of purity, or prudence, or poetry, or something of that sort. According to the "to the pure all things are pure" doctrine Borglum should have introduced his model as an example of the beautiful—if for no other reason—and even put her through a few poses to demonstrate lines of grace, etc. But what did he do? Why, he shunted her off into a retiring room until his caller had gone.

Either the girl, or Borglum, or both objected to the undress exhibition. Wherefore the discrepancy between practice and profession? "Consistency is the bugbear of little souls"—Emerson (and Borglum?).

Another example. Just the other day Attorney Schroder, the defender of the League, said in an address in Chicago apropos of Comstock's raid, "Of what use is it to denounce the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah to those who do not know what acts constituted those sins, and who may think you are denouncing a faith cure?" Did the gentleman with an extra-American name mean to say that for the sake or the privilege of denouncing lust he would explain in detail to the wives and daughters of America—who didn't know and ought not to know—the profanations of the towns whose unnatural excesses called down on them the wrath of God? If so, he should blush for his professions and his protestations. If in his zeal for free speech and free action—license—he had gotten beyond the blushing stage, some kind soul should appoint a full-blooded specialist in the art to blush for him. But, the Judge continued confidentially to the Dilettanti, despite these show speeches, which savored too much of claptrap and theatricality to be taken seriously, could anyone be so lost to personal decency and public policy.

Yes, the Judge continued, there was room for Comstock and probably a few assistants; and, despite an occasional mistake, public conscience would abet their activity. There was no quarrel between the studio and the society for the suppression of vice. The nude model had a legitimate place in art economy, but that place was behind the closed doors of the class room. The crude amateurish drawings of the nude had their proper function in art education, but their place was not in public print. Anthony had said this specifically and emphatically, and it ill behooved the League's officials, the Judge thought, to carry the matter into court. Anthony had just quietly put the stick in—was it dignified or worth while for the others to agitate?

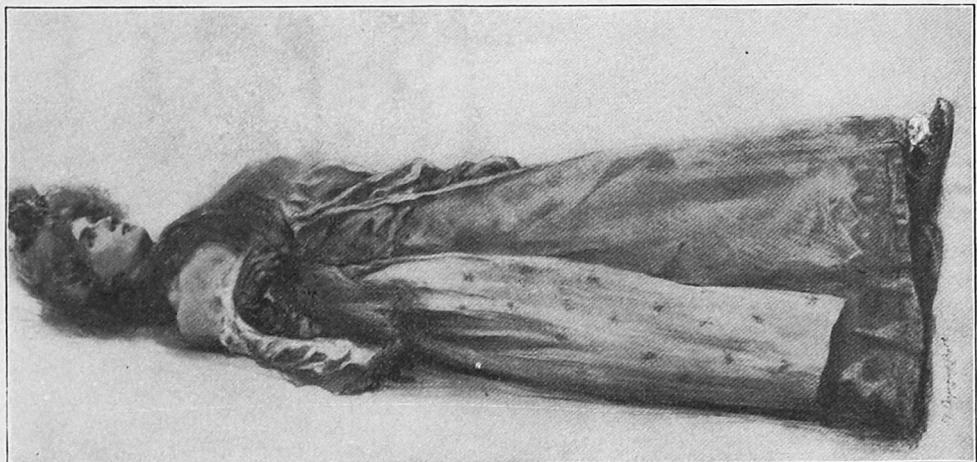
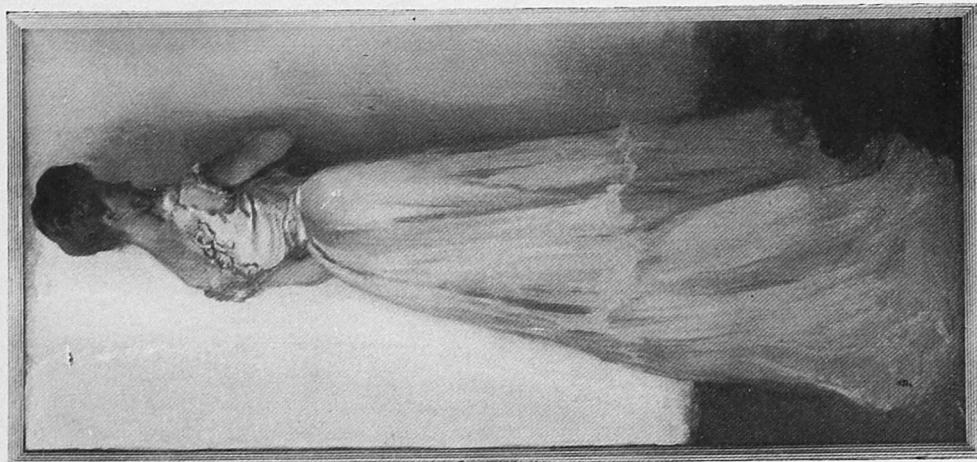
Just a closing word, the Judge went on, about this study of the nude in the class room. Wasn't it largely a fetich, a survival, a tradition—an attraction? Was it necessary for most students for the atelier to become a rival of the clinic? Was it policy to bring in a tramp from the street, so lost in manhood that he was willing to strip off and attitudinize for an hourly pittance before a bevy of young girls, who blazed with blushes till the novelty wore off and the sense of shame became blunted?

Was it essential for these young girls to draw "the altogether," as though they were making an anatomical chart for a medical book, in order to drape a pair of trousers over a set of masculine hips for a fashion plate? Was the case of the male student and the female nude radically different? In either case, what did the students usually gain? A few bad drawings they would naturally keep under cover and—experience.

Abolish the nude in class work? No. It was absolutely necessary in some lines of artistic endeavor; it was eminently desirable in other lines; but it was wholly worthless in many lines—and for most students. Hence a Comstock in the art school would not be an undesirable functionary, and a professional "quiz" as to motives, qualifications and ends to be attained would not be a worthless or undesirable part of a teacher's duties.



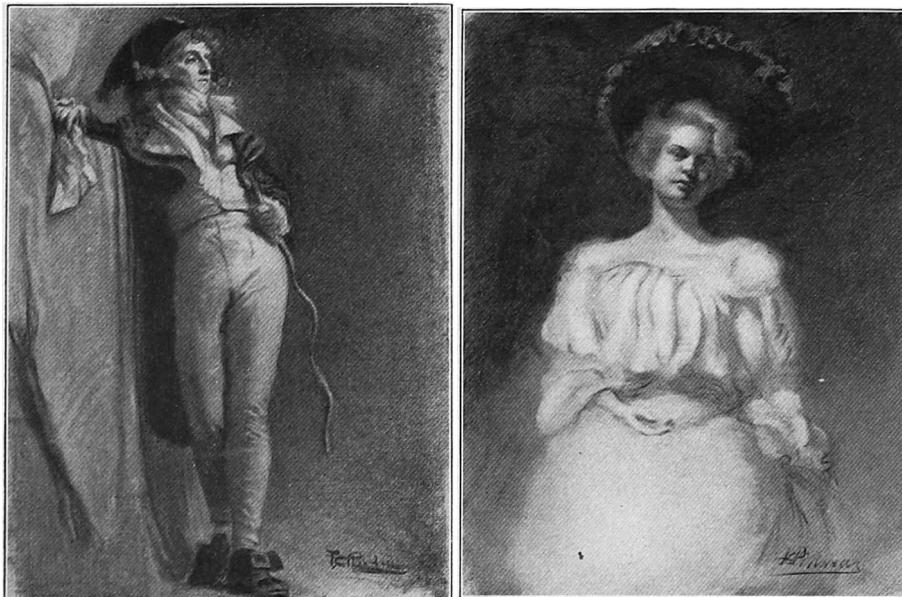
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ministers of finance and public instruction have agreed to apply \$10,000 to house the collection of nineteenth-century art presented to the nation by Moreau. The collection comprises early and late works of the 1830 school, with examples of subsequent art movements, including the impressionists.

The annual international art exhibition at Florence is remarkably strong and comprises over 400 works. The keystone is a collection of famous canvases by the deplored Nicolo Cannici, exhibited by its owners.

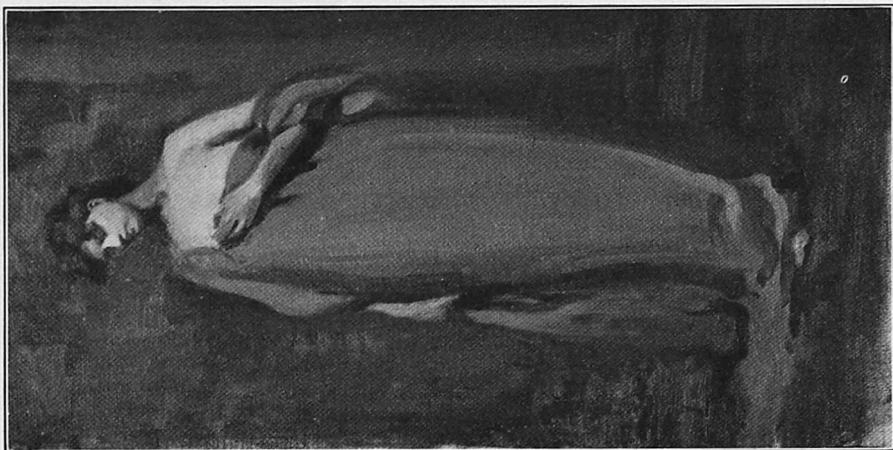


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Many names of the cosmopolitan art world are represented, notably Roll, Cagniard, Maurice Eliot, Fleury, Weerts, Dhurmer, Rolshoven, Pael, Abel Faiore and Lamy France. Among national artists represented are Gioli, Costelli, Martinelli, Ghiglia, Vianello, Constantini and Costetti. The room which contains the sculptures is very poor and incomplete.

The Pennsylvania Society of Miniatures will hold its annual exhibition in the galleries of the Pennsylvania Academy from November 5 to November 24, inclusive. It will be the effort of the management to make a thoroughly representative showing. The New York jury comprises Alice Ham Brewer, M. Lesley Bush Brown, Amy Otis, William J. Whittemore, and the Philadelphia jury, Ellen W. Ahrens, Cecelia Beaux, Hugh H. Breckenridge and Ludwig E. Faber.

The National Society of Craftsmen will hold its first exhibition in New York, December 3 to December 15. Special efforts are being made to secure exhibits from every craft centre in the country. Any com-



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